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# The NLD and Myanmar's Foreign Policy: Not New, But Different

Maung Aung Myoe

**Abstract:** This article argues that although the NLD government continues to adhere to the “independent, active, and non-aligned foreign policy,” the policy will be implemented through multiple tracks in diplomacy with a possibility of stronger focus on people-to-people contacts and multilateralism. The NLD's foreign policy, in terms of objectives and principles, is not new but it is different, as adjustments are made in the realm of diplomacy. The reasons for this lack of foreign policy change or transformation are that (1) the predecessor USDP government has more or less adjusted the country's foreign policy, (2) the Tatmadaw (Myanmar Armed Forces) continues to exercise strong influence over the foreign policy process, (3) the emerging geopolitical environment in the Asia-Pacific region shapes the country's foreign policy choices, and (4) the NLD's leadership style and political mandate provide little room for public access and input in foreign policy decision-making. It is expected that activism in Myanmar's foreign policy will be once again centre stage, with more dynamic diplomacy being conducted through multiple tracks under the NLD government. Aung San Suu Kyi's fame and global influence is perhaps the most important asset and driving force behind Myanmar's return to the world of international diplomacy. Myanmar's foreign policy under the NLD government, while retaining the survival and security of the state at its core, will not aim for the narrow interest of regime survival, but instead for the best interests of both state and society in Myanmar.

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**Keywords:** Myanmar, foreign policy, foreign relations, NLD

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## Introduction

After more than half a century of either direct military rule or military-backed governments in Myanmar, a civilian government came to power in March of 2016, led by the National League for Democracy (NLD) following a landslide victory in the November 2015 elections. U Htin Kyaw, a close confidante and lieutenant of Nobel laureate Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, became the president. At the time of this writing, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is union minister for foreign affairs, a significant position given that the foreign minister sits in both the cabinet and, more importantly, in the all-powerful National Defence and Security Council (NDSC); and is also the union minister for the president's office, which oversees all ministries of the government. Moreover, on 6 April 2016, she became “state counsellor”, the most controversial position created for her in the current political setting in Myanmar, with a protocol second only to the president, above two vice-presidents and all others. For all intents and purposes, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is the *de facto* ruler of Myanmar, rhetorically “staying above the president”.

As a long-term outspoken critic of countries supporting the previous military regime (1988–2010) and a beneficiary of Western support for promoting democracy in Myanmar, there are speculations and expectations that Myanmar's foreign policy under the NLD administration led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi would lean towards the West in general and Washington in particular, at the expense of displeasure and anxiety in Beijing (and, to a lesser extent, in Moscow). It was perhaps against this background that the *Global Times*, a mouthpiece of the Communist Party of China (CPC), hinted just a few days after the NLD's electoral victory that Myanmar's closer ties with United States at the expense of Chinese strategic interest would not serve Myanmar's long-term interests (*Global Times* 2015). To the best of my knowledge, no proper academic analysis has yet been conducted on the NLD's foreign policy, although a few journalistic or op-ed style pieces have been published (Selth 2016; Dai and Zhang 2016; Chow and Easley 2016; Chaw Chaw Sein 2016). While those articles do argue that the NLD's foreign policy would not be so much different from the previous government,<sup>1</sup> there was little or no explanation for why it would be the case, perhaps due to space limitations.

The present paper studies the NLD government's foreign policy. At the outset, I should admit that it is an interim assessment on the NLD's

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1 For instance, Andrew Selth argued that Myanmar's current non-aligned stance will undergo only minor adjustment.

foreign policy based on publicly available documents after one year in office. It is difficult to conduct interviews and study internal official documents. However, I sincerely believe that it is sufficient to present the NLD government's foreign policy. I analyse Myanmar's overall foreign policy posture and practices. I argue that although the NLD government continues to adhere to the "independent, active and non-aligned foreign policy", the policy will be implemented through multiple tracks in diplomacy with a possibility of stronger focus on people-to-people contacts and multilateralism. Therefore, I argue that the NLD's foreign policy, in terms of objectives and principles, is not new but it is different, as adjustments are made in the realm of diplomacy. The reasons for this lack of foreign policy change or transformation are that (1) the predecessor USDP government have more or less adjusted the country's foreign policy, (2) the Tatmadaw (Myanmar Armed Forces) continues to exercise strong influence over the foreign policy process, (3) the emerging geopolitical environment in the Asia-Pacific region shape the country's foreign policy choice, and (4) the NLD's leadership style and political mandate provides little room for public access and input in foreign policy decision making.

## 1 NLD and Foreign Policy Statements

When the NLD issued its manifesto for national elections in 2015, it provided the following mission statement on foreign policy:

(1) To pursue an active and independent foreign policy, and to establish friendly and close political relations with regard to international matters that may arise firmly on the side of genuine democratic values. (2) To identify and cooperate with other countries on joint economic enterprises of mutual benefit. In particular, to work together for the benefit of the region on issues relating to regional organizations and programmes. (3) To have close and strong relations with the UN, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and other such organizations. (4) To give particular emphasis to the role of civil society organisations in communicating with the international community.<sup>2</sup>

In her interview with the *Washington Post* on 19 November 2015, about 10 days after it had become clear that the NLD won a landslide victory, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi confirmed that her government would follow a

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2 *National League for Democracy 2015 Election Manifesto* (authorised translation), p. 8.

non-aligned foreign policy as this had been a successful strategy ever since Myanmar gained its independence (Weymouth 2015). On 30 March 2016, President Htin Kyaw delivered his inaugural speech but did not mention anything about his government's foreign policy. Just one week after the inauguration of the NLD government, on 7 April 2016, the state-owned *Myanma Alin* newspaper, now controlled by the NLD's minister for information, carried an editorial on Myanmar foreign policy that said:

the essence of Myanmar foreign policy, persistently practiced from the time of the liberation from the colonial yoke to the present, is maintaining friendly relations with countries all over the world. (*Myanma Alin* 2016a)

The editorial also claimed that:

Myanmar's foreign policy, based on friendship with all, will not only continue to be consistent with the changing world politics but also, besides enhancing national interests, serves the world peace, development, and prosperity as it enters into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. (*Myanma Alin* 2016a)

Then, on 18 April 2016, in her Myanmar New Year message, for the first time since she became foreign minister, Aung San Suu Kyi briefly explained Myanmar's foreign policy. In somewhat vague and ambiguous terms, she stated:

I think people will want to know our foreign policy as our country has to struggle in the global context. Ever since the attainment of independence, our country has maintained good relations with countries all over the world. This is something that our country can be very much proud of. Since regaining independence in January 1948, our country, despite being a small and war-torn country, has always won international respect. Why? [It is because] the talent of our people has been resilient and shining even amidst the dramatic woe. We are all required to make concerted effort to reach such a level of talent internationally recognised again. *We need to ponder how to continue our journey and which policies and which fundamental ideologies to adopt.* This will be a long journey. And the future of a nation is a thing of eternity. This is an ordeal, having to face a host of challenges. (Aung San Suu Kyi 2016) (*Italics added*)

Aung San Suu Kyi's key message appears to be that it is the overall level of Myanmar people's talent and quality human resources that raises the

prestige and status of the country and is the key to Myanmar's foreign policy success.

Finally, on 22 April 2016, the foreign minister briefed Myanmar's diplomatic community on the country's foreign policy. While the briefing was short on details about what principles, objectives, goals and strategies Myanmar would pursue, it generally dealt with overall nature of diplomacy that Myanmar's foreign policy would embrace. Neutralism, universal friendship, human rights were key words in her speech. She stated:

Since we became independent in 1948, we have adopted a policy of neutrality and universal friendship. We were one of the first signatories to the United Nations charter and to the United Nations' Charter on [Universal Declaration of] Human Rights, which means we always emphasise the need for international cooperation and the need to respect human beings as required because friendship and peace are dependent on security and happiness of all people in the world. This has always been our aim – that our country should be the grounds for fostering better relations not just between our neighbours and ourselves, but between us and the rest of the world and between all other countries as well.

What is not clear in her statement is the extent to which the NLD government believes in the collective security of the UN and the centrality of international regimes in interstate relations. In addition to confirmation of Myanmar's neutralist foreign policy, the foreign minister explained a vision in her foreign policy in the following terms.

We are not a very big or very powerful country. But we hope that we will be able to lead the world when it comes to approaching all the problems that beset our globe with sincerity, with goodwill towards all, and with a genuine desire to work hard to achieve the kind of situation of which all human beings dream, which we very seldom manage to achieve. It is always good to have goals, even if these goals seem sometimes unattainable, I think it is a basic necessity that we should aim high.

The rest of the briefing was about what Aung San Suu Kyi called "a new approach" for her vision, which basically was a people-centred diplomacy. The briefing was hailed in editorials in state-owned newspapers on 23 April 2016. The *Kyemon Daily*, with a little exaggeration, praised the briefing, saying that "such a clear official explanation on Myanmar foreign policy was rarely heard in the past". "We are witnessing a change from government-to-government relations that we used to see in the past to

people-based relations”, the paper claimed. It further waxed lyrical on the “people-based diplomacy” by saying that “in reality, friendly relations among countries all over the world is a necessity for peace prevailed among people on the globe and this kind of universal friendship could be possible only with the people-centred relations.” In *Myanma Alin Daily*, the editorial entitled “Diplomacy and Future Vision” explained Myanmar’s foreign policy in historical, cultural and geopolitical context:

Our country has a good tradition of being well versed in international relations and diplomacy since ancient time. After the independence, our country has followed an independent non-aligned policy and stayed neutral in the East-West Cold War struggle. Due to our country’s correct policy stance on the international political stage and our ardent adherence to Myanmar culture and tradition that firmly rooted in four worldly cardinal values of loving-kindness (metta), compassion (karuna), sympathetic joy (mudita) and equanimity (upekkha), even at the height of the Cold War, Myanmar national U Thant served as the secretary general of the United Nations and handled [international] crises of most dangerous magnitude threatening world peace. [...] The geographical location of Myanmar has special characteristics. As it is situated between two Asian great powers, China and India, and between regional groupings of South Asia and Southeast Asia, there are both opportunities and challenges for our country. By adopting and following correct policies, we have to turn these challenges into opportunities. Unity is an essential requirement [for Myanmar] to become a strong nation. Political power, economic power and national defence power cannot be built up separately, but only through coordination and in support of each other. For materialisation of these powers, it is necessary to build monolithic unity within the country. The pronouncement of determination to make Myanmar a strong nation through the strength and effort of the people to the world is like we are seeing a clear vision of our country’s future and expressing our resolute confidence in the people. (*Myanma Alin* 2016b)<sup>3</sup>

Much later, the NLD’s weekly journal, *D Wave*, published on 9 May 2016, carried an editorial entitled “Historical Mosaics of Myanmar’s Foreign Policy” (*D-Wave Journal* 2016). However, the NLD’s interpretation and understanding of Myanmar foreign policy took a critical tone and was partly based on simplistic views and assumptions; it also had loaded

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3 The editorial mistakenly mentioned “brahmavihāras” as “lawkavihāras”.



words and phrases. Since the journal essentially reflects the NLD's view, it is worth quoting in full:

Myanmar's non-aligned policy practiced since the independence in 1948 was regarded by great countries in the world as suitable to world politics of the time and an appropriate policy. If we analyse the historical mosaic of Myanmar's foreign policy 68 years later, [it could be found that] the policy was determined by political belief of and political system practiced by people who controlled the state. Sometimes, the foreign policy got a bad reputation because of mental instability of a dictator. [...] After independence, on the international front, Myanmar severely suffered the tide of the Cold War bloc politics and, on the domestic front, has struggled with factionalism and ethnic armed conflicts as well as with the flame of Kuomintang aggression. In this very delicate and frail political vicious circle, non-alignment was chosen as the best policy. The Bandung Five Principles were the classical principles that reflected the reality of time, place and complexity. [...] However, in 1960s, Myanmar practised aggressive neutralism. It not only stayed away from international institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), but also withdrew membership from the Non-aligned Movement (NAM) that it helped establish; thus embarrassing the country and making it a mockery. Political and military situations deteriorated to such a point that all the national races living on the same stretch of land took up arms. Sino-Myanmar riots and conflicts had grown in Yangon city and border areas. By cutting political, economic and developmental relations with international community, it has followed an isolationist [foreign] policy. [...] Today in 2016, drawing lessons from the past, Myanmar's foreign policy gives priority to friendly relations, not only with neighbouring countries but also with countries all over the world. Myanmar is at the strategic junction of South Asia and Southeast Asia. It has become geopolitically significant. It is necessary to take advantage of this challenge and significance [of being in a geographically significant position] as opportunities for peace, prosperity and mutually beneficial cooperation. A foreign policy that rests solely on the benefit of oneself is not a good policy. [...] Isolationist policy must be abandoned. In those important issues that arise in international forum, independent and active foreign policy that firmly stands on democratic principles of universal truth is the only policy appropriate to the present age. Especially in regional organisations and projects like ASEAN, we should work together for the benefit of both the country and the region. We will have friendly relations with the United Nations,

the World Bank, and the IMF. [...] In essence, Myanmar's foreign policy is a "win-win" [let him win; let me gain advantage] policy. It is a policy of "beauty of the both sides". It is a policy of "let enmity be short and amity long". The people-to-people relationship is the key driving force of [Myanmar's] foreign policy.

Overall, the NLD's foreign policy statements indicate that a key objective is to put Myanmar back on the international stage and on the world map. It is also about Myanmar foreign policy, under the guidance of Aung San Suu Kyi, becoming more independent and active on the international stage.

## 2 Public Expectation on the NLD's Foreign Policy

Public expectations regarding the NLD's foreign policy performance are quite high. On 1 April 2016, on the first day of the new administration, the state-owned *Myanma Alin* newspaper carried an article entitled "The Field of International Relations and Myanmar's Status" by Z Pe Win. The article stated:

Now, as the Nobel laureate with over 130 medals and international influence is going to assume the duty of foreign minister, it is absolutely certain that Myanmar's role in international relations will be heightened. [...] It is now that Myanmar is on the right track to become a shining star in the international community after half a century of withered life. Myanmar's active neutralist foreign policy will be dynamic. With correct policies of the new government, based on national reconciliation, domestic peace, and the emergence of democratic federal union, Myanmar is now ready for a deserved status in the field of international relations. (Z Pe Win 2016)

On 7 April 2016, despite just a week into the new administration, the same newspaper claimed: "with the emergence of a democratically elected civilian government after more than half a century, Myanmar's foreign policy has become more dynamic" (*Myanma Alin* 2016a).

Another article in a private weekly journal took a similar tone: "For nearly 50 years, unfortunately thanks to military generals, our country became isolated", said the author. He continued:

After coming to power of the NLD government led by President U Htin Kyaw and State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, not

only for economic reasons but also for diplomatic ones, it is hoped that [the government] will make effort to make Myanmar earning respect from both great powers and developing countries around the world, and I firmly believe that Daw Aung San Suu Kyi will fulfil this hope. (U Tin Oo 2016)

In another article, author Dr Yan Myo Thein, apparently with high expectations, wrote that

ASEAN will warmly welcome State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi since her international fame and influence is supportive not only for Myanmar people but also for ASEAN region and ASEAN people,

and that

with her backing, ASEAN and regional politics will become stronger and more powerful. (Yan Myo Thein 2016a)

The same author, in an earlier publication, gave a similar message of the need for ASEAN to employ Aung San Suu Kyi's fame and influence to get out of the regional political context and to attain a strategic position in world political setting. At the same time, he claimed that

if Myanmar could implement foreign policy independently, actively and without any alignment for five years under the new [NLD] government, Myanmar will reach a top strategic status in international diplomacy. (Yan Myo Thein 2016b)

When Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong asked Aung San Suu Kyi to take "an active leadership role in international arena and cooperation on behalf of ASEAN" during his visit on 7 June 2016, expectations of Myanmar's international role was further enhanced among the Myanmar public.

As illustrated above, there are clearly great public expectations on the new NLD-led government in general and on Aung San Suu Kyi in particular to raise the country profile in international community. She is expected to raise the self-esteem and self-confidence of Myanmar people as they have, for a long time, suffered a sense of insecurity and inferiority. One case in this regard is noteworthy to demonstrate this point. On 15 April 2016, a renowned Thai journalist with extensive experience coverage Myanmar affairs, Kavi Chongkittavorn, published an online article titled "Myanmar's Mirror – 10 Tips: 'the ASEAN Way' vs. 'the Suu Kyi Way'" on *Mizzima*, a well-known online and print media in Myanmar (Chongkittavorn 2016a). The same article was reprinted in the *Nations* newspaper in Thailand on 25 April 2016 under the slightly modified title

of “Dos and Don’ts for FM Aung San Suu Kyi” (Chongkittavorn 2016b). Then, on the same day, the article appeared as “Dos and Don’ts for Suu Kyi on Dealing with Asean: The Nation Columnist” in Singapore’s *The Strait Times* (Chongkittavorn 2016c). The article was basically about small tips for successful diplomacy in ASEAN as Aung San Suu Kyi is a new-comer to the regional association. However, a Myanmar author named Tharawun (Pyay) took issue with this article, but referring to the *Strait Times*, and published a highly critical review article in a local weekly journal entitled “ASEAN ministers who are fearful of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi’s power and influence (or) the superfluous *Straits Times* Newspaper” (Tharawun (Pyay) 2016). The author stated that Chongkittavorn’s article lacked any substance and accused it of being a coordinated attack on Aung San Suu Kyi in collaboration between a Thai journalist and a newspaper from Singapore. In Tharawan’s view, the article was merely a reflection of Thailand and Singapore’s fear and envy about being overshadowed by the fame of Aung San Suu Kyi. I am not sure what this author would say if he knew that the original article appeared first in Myanmar’s *Mizzima* media. This is an indication of frustration, inferiority complex and a lack of self-esteem and security, as Myanmar had long been an international backwater.

Meanwhile, cautious views have also been expressed about the NLD’s foreign policy. During a debate on Myanmar foreign policy, organised by DVB (*Democratic Voice of Burma*) on 1 May 2016, participants discussed issues, including nationalist sentiment, that would undermine Myanmar’s foreign relations (Myo Thar Htet 2016). One article in a weekly journal questioned whether Aung San Suu Kyi could handle the “Chinese dragon” and the “American eagle”, which can shake up the global economy, in Myanmar’s new age of international relations (Zeya Thu 2016).

### 3 NLD Government and Foreign Relations

In her interview with China’s state-run *Xinhua News Agency* on 18 November 2016, Aung San Suu Kyi expressed the view that “Myanmar had no enemies, but relations with neighbours were more sensitive than others and needed to be carefully handled”. In her words, “ties between neighbours are always more delicate than that between countries far apart”. She continued:

We’ll pay special attention to our relations in order to make them smooth, effective and clear [and] we maintain friendly ties with friends from far and near, and that there’s no reason establishing a

friendship is impossible, if both parties are willing. (Zaw and Slodkowski 2015)

Within a couple of months after the new administration started, Myanmar received state visits from the foreign ministers (or equivalents) of China, Italy, Canada, Japan, Thailand, Singapore and the United States. The Indian foreign minister's visit was cancelled at the last moment due to her health problem, it is believed. These visits were followed by visits from the foreign ministers of Turkey, Luxemburg and the Netherlands. In January 2017, delegates from Ukraine, the Czech Republic and the United Kingdom visited Myanmar. Canadian Foreign Affairs Minister Stéphane Dion's visit was intended to show his country's support for the democratic transition in Myanmar. Italian Foreign Minister Paolo Gentiloni was the first senior Western diplomat to meet new Myanmar foreign minister; the visit was "to support Myanmar's newly elected NLD government" (*Agencia EFE* 2016). Aung San Suu Kyi's statement at the joint press briefing with her Italian counterpart on 6 April 2016 appeared to enlist Italy's assistance in managing international expectation of Myanmar's performance in both domestic policy and foreign relations.<sup>4</sup> Foreign ministers from Thailand and Singapore were the first regional neighbours to come to Myanmar; both countries have strong business interests and investments in Myanmar. The Singaporean visit also marked the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of diplomatic relations between the two countries. Visits by the Singaporean prime minister in June 2016, the Laotian president in August 2016, the Thai deputy prime minister and the Cambodian deputy prime minister in February 2017, and the Philippine president in March 2017 showcased the importance of neighbouring countries in Myanmar's external relations.

The first foreign visit by the new president, U Htin Kyaw, and the state-counsellor-cum-foreign-minister, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, was to Laos on 6 May 2016, a safe destination with no geopolitical controversy. The visit was intended to show support for Laos' term of ASEAN

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4 Aung San Suu Kyi said: "Our nation is made up of many ethnic peoples, and because of that we put great emphasis on the need for unity and peace. Without unity and peace, nothing else can succeed. I am sure that Italy is more aware of this than any other countries because Italy has a long history of dealing with different peoples all over the world. Since the time of Rome when Italy stretched its arms far and wide, it has understood the complexity of relationships between different cultures and peoples. And because of this understanding, as a basic principle of successful foreign relations, I have no doubt that, Italy will help us in our efforts to establish good relations with our friends all over the world."

chairmanship. This one-day trip was the least controversial overseas trip by the NLD government leadership. So far, this is the only trip that the president and the state counsellor have undertaken together. The president's role in Myanmar's foreign relations is mostly ceremonial. He went to Russia in May 2016 for Russia-ASEAN summit, to Mongolia in July for the 11<sup>th</sup> ASEM Summit, and to Vietnam in October for the 8<sup>th</sup> CLMV Summit and the 7<sup>th</sup> ACMECS Summit. For bilateral state visits, he journeyed to India in August 2016 and to Cambodia in February 2017. September 2016 was the busiest month for the state counsellor since she has extensively travelled, first to Laos for the 28<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> ASEAN summits and related summits, then to the United Kingdom and the United States, and finally to the UN to attend the General Assembly. Then, in mid-October, she went to India for BIMSTEC summit, where she also had separate bilateral meetings with the leaders of Sri Lanka and China.

As the de facto head of government, State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's first destination for a bilateral visit was in June 2016 to Thailand, where the most significant number of Myanmar migrant workers is living. The focus of discussion during the bilateral meeting was on Myanmar migrant workers in Thailand, whom she addressed in a controversial mass meeting. During the visit, in order to

enhance people-to-people contact along the border provinces, to improve the quality of living of Myanmar migrant workers in Thailand and to prevent the problems of human trafficking and illegal employment in Thailand,

the Thai prime minister and Aung San Suu Kyi witnessed the signing ceremony of the three important documents: (1) Agreement on Border Crossing between the Two Countries (2) Memorandum of Understanding on Labour Cooperation, and (3) Agreement on Employment of Workers.

### 3.1 Relations with China

The very first foreign dignitary invited by the NLD government was the Chinese Minister for Foreign Affairs Wang Yi, who came to Myanmar for a brief trip on 5 April 2016. Wang Yi held a meeting with Aung San Suu Kyi and a joint press conference, where the former confirmed China's position on Myanmar and support for Myanmar's process of national reconciliation. "China-Myanmar relations are now at a new historical starting point", said Wang Yi and he called for the two nations to "reinforce high-level exchanges as soon as possible" and "to properly tackle

issues facing their cooperation” (Zhang and Wang 2016). Aung San Suu Kyi also proudly claimed that the visit was to honour the new NLD-led government in Myanmar. While the Chinese minister hinted at the resumption of some Chinese projects or investment in Myanmar, particularly in reference to the Myitsone hydropower project, which was suspended by the previous UDSP government in late 2011, his Myanmar counterpart kept tight-lipped on the matter and simply claimed that she had not studied the relevant documents. The Chinese foreign minister also met the commander-in-chief of defence services and the general secretary of the USDP.

In fact, China has been carefully building up a relationship with the NLD and Aung San Suu Kyi since the party's entry into parliamentary politics in 2012. The party-to-party relations have been cultivated for some time and Aung San Suu Kyi was invited to China for a visit during which Chinese dignitaries, including President Xi Jinping, received her warmly and accorded her a red carpet welcome. However, soon after the election outcomes indicated that the NLD was the winning party with an absolute majority to form a government, the *Global Times*, a newspaper that is linked to the Communist Party of China (CPC) and reflects the party line, editorialised what could be considered as “China's position on Myanmar” and subtly warned of the disadvantages of moving too close to the United States (or the West in general). The paper said:

There is also a focus on possible adjustments to Myanmar's foreign policy, particularly its relations with China. The Sino-Myanmese relationship has seen a swing in recent years from tilting toward China to a middle point between China and the West. Myanmar can continue to fine-tune the position, yet its strategic significance will be framed. *No observer deems that Myanmar will completely tilt toward the US as such a witless move would ruin the strategic space and resources it can obtain from China's amicable policies.* Some analysts even predict some backswing in China-Myanmar relationship. The disruption of large programs between the two sides does not serve Myanmar's interests. The NLD is more persuasive to the public than the current regime and Suu Kyi has never publicly spoken ill of these large projects, which partly prepares the two countries to resume cooperation on the large projects. During the transition of bilateral ties from special to normal, China has been strategically magnanimous and kind. It neither finds fault with Myanmar nor obstructs its other diplomatic options. Keeping a friendly and cooperative relationship with China serves the long-term national interests of Myanmar. Why should Myanmar limit its choice to the US only? Myanmar aligning with the US is conceived by some

people from the ideological perspective, but national interests are diverse and overlapping. Myanmar will only seek to maximize its national interests rather than make strategic sacrifices to court China or the US. (*Global Times* 2015) (Italics added)

There are several issues, both political and economic, in bilateral relations that China and Myanmar need to tackle. With the strong political legitimacy that the NLD or Aung San Suu Kyi enjoys, it is likely that the Myanmar government could deal with them with more confidence for mutually beneficial relations at the same time as maintaining Myanmar's freedom of action.

Suu Kyi's trip to China in August 2016, rather than going to the United State first, was believed to be a pragmatic choice given that China plays an instrumental role in Myanmar's stability and security. Ever since the NLD came to power, she had completely dropped her critical tone of China and presented a reasonably pragmatic outlook in her dealing with the giant neighbour. Her visit was at the invitation of Premier Li Keqiang, which indicated that she was regarded as head of government. During her five-day trip to China (17–21 August 2016), she was cordially received by President Xi Jinping, Premier Li Keqiang, and Chairman Zhang Dejiang of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress. During their encounters,

the two sides had in-depth exchange of views and reached important consensus on carrying forward their traditional friendship and advancing their comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership in the new era.<sup>5</sup>

A significant aspect of the visit was the NLD administration's official acknowledgement of China's "Belt and Road" initiative as well as the initiative of Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) Economic Corridor and, more importantly, (re)assurance of its adherence to the one-China principle, and expressed its understanding and support of China's position on Taiwan, Tibet and Xinjiang. The joint communiqué issued at the end of the visit stated:

Both sides spoke highly of the "Pauk-Phaw" friendship between the two countries, and agreed that as joint initiators of the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence, Myanmar and China will ad-

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<sup>5</sup> See "Joint Press Release between the Republic of the Union of Myanmar and the People's Republic of China", 20 August, online: <[www.president-of-fice.gov.mm/en/?q=briefing-room/statements-and-releases/2016/08/22/id-6528](http://www.president-of-fice.gov.mm/en/?q=briefing-room/statements-and-releases/2016/08/22/id-6528)> (6 April 2017).



here to the above principles and work together for progress in bilateral relations on the basis of mutual respect, mutual trust, equality and mutual benefit. Both sides affirmed that they would continue to uphold good neighbourly policy toward each other and to continue to attach priority to strengthening their bilateral relations for the mutual benefit of the two peoples and to promote greater stability and development in both countries. Both sides reaffirmed that they would always put the interests of the two peoples at the forefront, adopt a strategic and long-term perspective, and work to achieve new progress in their comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership.

Both sides agreed to maintain the tradition of close high-level contacts, to enhance strategic communication and to deepen exchanges on the experience of governance. They further agreed to increase friendly exchanges and cooperation at different levels, particularly between political parties and peoples.

The two sides agreed to promote rule of law in the border areas, and to enhance trade, economic cooperation and various forms of friendly exchanges that would contribute to the well-being of the peoples.

The two countries also signed a deal to build a bridge near their border, 32 kilometres from the border in northeastern Myanmar and near the Kokang region. It was also reported that China had agreed to build two hospitals in Myanmar's two largest cities, Yangon and Mandalay. State Counsellor Suu Kyi and Premier Li agreed to "strengthen cooperation and to ensure prevalence of peace and stability in their border areas". China reportedly supported Myanmar efforts to realise peace and national reconciliation through political dialogue and Premier Li reaffirmed China's support for efforts to bring peace to northern Myanmar. When the Chinese side raised the issue of the resumption of Myitsone hydro-power dam project, Suu Kyi simply replied that the matter was under review by a special committee and that she would follow the committee's recommendations.

Despite all these assurances, Sino-Myanmar relations have witnessed difficulties as Myanmar authorities strongly suspect that China is behind the insurgent groups that attacked civilian targets and security outposts in Northern Shan State in 2016 and 2017. In addition, the Myanmar government is fully aware that China holds the keys to the success of the peace process in Myanmar and it is essential and crucial to maintain good relations with China. In practical terms, Myanmar authorities, particularly in the military, have learned that it is in the long-term inter-

ests of the country for Myanmar to positively engage with China, without undermining the long-established and cherished foreign policy principles.

### 3.2 Relations with India

Myanmar's relationship with neighbouring India is likely to be smooth since India, as the world's largest democracy, will be willing to assist in democratic institution building in Myanmar. Under the rubric of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's "Act East" policy, Myanmar has increasingly become an important land bridge for India to realise its strategic vision. A highway project between Tamu (India) and Mesot (Thailand) via Myanmar could be an economic corridor that would benefit Myanmar. Indian investment in Myanmar is modest and does not have much of an image problem. Besides, Aung San Suu Kyi seems to have a sentimental attachment to India as she resided and schooled there for several years while she was with her ambassador mother in the early 1960s. As mentioned earlier, President Htin Kyaw visited India in August 2016. During the visit, the Indian government raised issues over border security and maritime security. The joint communiqué issued at the end of the visit highlighted these points and stated:

the two sides alluded to the importance of sound border management as an intrinsic part of maintaining border security, peace and stability along the entire length of their common border [and] agreed that Maritime Security Cooperation in the Bay of Bengal is vital for both countries.<sup>6</sup>

The Indian leadership also promised to support Myanmar's peace process and national reconciliation.

### 3.3 Relations with Japan

It is expected that the NLD government will maintain pragmatic relations with Japan despite years of conflicting opinions about how to deal with the military government. During the visit of Japanese Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida to Myanmar on 3 May 2016, Suu Kyi, in her capacity as foreign minister, clarified her position and said that it was natural for

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<sup>6</sup> See "Draft Joint Statement Issued on the Occasion of the State Visit of the President of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar to India", online: <[www.president-office.gov.mm/en/?q=briefing-room/statements-and-releases/2016/08/30/id-6557](http://www.president-office.gov.mm/en/?q=briefing-room/statements-and-releases/2016/08/30/id-6557)> (6 April 2017).

the Japanese government to maintain a relationship with Myanmar in a manner different from Western governments. She also accepted the diversity of views as she believed in democracy and felt that Myanmar and Japan have been using this diversity to work together to find solutions. The Japanese side pledged to help Myanmar's national reconciliation and peace process and to continue providing assistance for the new government. On 6 June, Japanese Defence Minister Gen Nakatani became the first defence minister to come to Myanmar for the NLD government, and, in fact, the first ever Japanese defence minister to visit the country since the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries in 1954. The Japanese defence minister pledged to build capacity for the Tatmadaw in non-combat areas.

In fact, the Japanese side has been reaching out to the NLD for some time. On 27 November 2015, shortly after the NLD won the elections, Japanese Foreign Minister Kishida received the NLD's key figure and spokesperson U Nyan Win in Tokyo. During their encounter, Kishida explained that "Japan intends to exchange opinions with the NLD in order to support democratization and development in Myanmar and strengthen Japan-Myanmar relations" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2015). Then, in January 2016, a 15-member economic delegation from the NLD was invited by the Nippon Foundation to tour the Bank of Japan and the Tokyo Stock Exchange, and hold meetings with the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, the Financial Services Agency, and the Small and Medium Enterprise Agency during their stay from 23 to 30 January 2016 (The Nippon Foundation 2016). A Myanmar parliamentary delegation, comprised mostly of NLD members of parliament and led by U Tin Maung Win, was invited to Japan in May 2016. The welcome reception for the delegation on 10 May 2016 was attended by the Japanese foreign minister. Several meetings were organised not only at ministries related to foreign affairs, trade and infrastructure but also at the Japan Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the Japan Business Federation (Keidanren). Finally Daw Aung San Suu Kyi visited Japan in early November and, during the trip, the Japanese government agreed to provide Yen 40 billion of development assistance.

### 3.4 Relations with Russia

From the start of the new administration, Myanmar's relations with Russia appeared to move in a positive direction. Myanmar's Defence Minister Lieutenant General Sein Win went to Moscow for ASEAN-Russia Defense Ministers' meeting. There, he met his counterpart, Sergei Shoigu,

on 26 April 2016 and discussed matters related to cooperation between the two militaries. The Russian defence minister has reportedly stated that “the bilateral cooperation is developing dynamically, especially in the naval field and culture” and that it will be further strengthened in the military and military-technical areas (*Mizzima* 2016). The Russian defence minister noted that one important direction of relations between the two militaries is in the field of education for Myanmar servicemen in Russia, apparently in reference to a large number of Tatmadaw officers pursuing their graduate education in Russian higher education institutes. In response, Sein Win said that “Russian party and Russian army has supported us when Myanmar was facing challenging times”. It was obviously a reference to Russia’s use of veto, together with China, to block UNSC’s resolution on Myanmar proposed by the United States and the United Kingdom in January 2007.

On 5 May 2016, Deputy Defence Minister Rear Admiral Myint Nwe came to the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (Union Assembly) to present the Myanmar-Russia Defence Cooperation Agreement for approval. He stated that the signing of the agreement would create a new level of defence cooperation between the two countries, thereby fostering dialogue and mutual understanding of defence policies in terms of international and regional security. It was further justified that the cooperation agreement will enhance counter-terrorism activities, exchange of information, development of defence sector, and be supportive in UN-led peace keeping and peace-support operations. Five days later, the agreement was approved by the NLD-dominated Pyidaungsu Hluttaw without any objection. Meanwhile, Russian warships from the Pacific Fleet – the *Admiral Vinogradov* and two other support ships – came to Myanmar for a port call from 18 to 22 May 2016. About the same time, President Htin Kyaw went to Sochi for the ASEAN-Russia Summit, where he was warmly received by President Vladimir Putin and held a bilateral meeting. On the military sides, Commander-in-Chief of the Land Forces of Russian Federation Colonel General Oleg L Salyukov and Myanmar’s Deputy Commander-in-Chief Vice Senior General Soe Win visited each other’s countries in June and October 2016. In the meantime, international media reported that the Tatmadaw is going to receive several units of Yak-130 advanced training aircraft from Russia and Russia will continue as a major source of arm supply for the Tatmadaw.

### 3.5 Relations with the United States

For the last couple of decades, Washington’s Myanmar policy has been partially influenced by Aung San Suu Kyi. For the time being, the US

government seems to continue its Myanmar policy on a (human) rights-based approach. One example is the issue of so-called “Rohingya” community, officially referred to by the Myanmar government as [illegal] Bengali migrants. In fact, there has been mounting pressure from the international community on the NLD government to address the problem. For instance, *TIME* magazine has already mentioned the Rohingya issue as one of the challenges for the new Myanmar government just one day after the inauguration.

When the US embassy in Yangon issued a statement, on 20 April 2016, extending condolences to the families of 21 people who died a day earlier when a boat transporting them capsized, it cited local reports and identified the victims as Rohingya. The statement has become a target of ire among the Myanmar public and a protest was staged in front of the US embassy in Yangon on 28 April, a day after President Htin Kyaw accepted the credentials of the new US Ambassador Scot Marciel. The story does not stop there.

The *New York Times*' editorial printed on 9 May 2016 criticised the NLD government on the Rohingya issue under the headline of “Aung San Suu Kyi's cowardly stance”, generating rage among Myanmar people (*New York Times* 2016). The editorial highlighted the link between the Rohingya case with the US sanction policy. The editorial stated:

In the end, the reason Ms. Aung San Suu Kyi doesn't want the Americans to say “Rohingya” doesn't really matter. What matters is that a woman whose name has been synonymous with human rights for a generation, a woman who showed unflinching courage in the face of despotism, has continued an utterly unacceptable policy of the military rulers she succeeded. Ms. Aung San Suu Kyi would be wise to reconsider her stance immediately. Her halo has been a central factor in Myanmar's reacceptance into the world community after decades of ostracism, but already there are calls by human rights groups in the United States for President Obama to renew sanctions against the country before they expire on May 20. (*New York Times* 2016)

A day later, on 10 May 2016, Marciel stated that he would continue using the term Rohingya to refer to people that the Myanmar government called “Bengali” despite the fact that the Myanmar Ministry of Foreign Affairs has already sent an advisory note to all embassies in Yangon on 6 May warning them against the use of the term. The ambassador explained: “Our position globally and our international practice is to recognize that communities anywhere have the ability to choose what they should be called [...] and we respect that” (Słodkowski 2016). This re-

mark provoked strong criticism from the largely Buddhist Myanmar people and has become a heated issue among social media users. In order to cool the situation, the ambassador said that he would be careful when using terms that are not acceptable to the Myanmar people when he met Thura U Shwe Mann, chairman of the Special Projects Implementation Committee, on 11 May 2016, but he stopped short of promising not to use the term. In fact, on 12 May 2016, the State Department spokesperson, Ms Elizabeth Trudeau, categorically stated that the US government's position is to continue the use of the term "Rohingya".<sup>7</sup>

Secretary of State John Kerry's visit to Naypyitaw on 22 May 2016 was intended to support the democratic transition taking place in Myanmar and to confirm Obama's policy of making "Myanmar a central focus of US policy towards Asia." With regard to Washington's approach towards Myanmar, Kerry explained that the US would maintain sanction policies in consultation with the NLD government to further deepen the reform process, with the aim of "consolidating a civilian-led democracy" in Myanmar.<sup>8</sup>

During the joint press conference, a question was asked about the US's position on the Muslim community (or Rohingya) in Rakhine state. Aung San Suu Kyi appeared to seek an understanding of the delicate and difficult situation to handle the Bengali (or Rohingya) issue from the international community and the United States in particular.<sup>9</sup> The US

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7 See *U.S. Department of State*, online: <[www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2016/05/257138.htm#BURMA](http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2016/05/257138.htm#BURMA)> (25 May 2016).

8 John Kerry said: "In consultation with the elected government and working with our own Congress, we have adjusted our sanctions policy now to strengthen democracy, to encourage inclusive economic growth, and to facilitate foreign investment in the civilian-led economy; and at the same time, we are maintaining some sanctions in order to encourage all institutions, investors, and members of society to support the government's continued reform efforts that are aimed at consolidating a civilian-led democracy. Since 2012, we have provided more than \$500 million in assistance for civil society, for national reconciliation, for democracy, for respect for human rights, and enhancing the health and the food security of vulnerable populations. And we have supported peace and reconciliation, as well as families and communities in many parts of the countries that – a country that have suffered from natural disaster or conflict, including in Rakhine state."

9 In her words: "Emotive terms make it very difficult for us to find a peaceful and sensible resolution to our problems. [...] All that we are asking is that people should be aware of the difficulties we are facing and to give us enough space to solve all our problems. [...] What we are asking for is that those who really wish us well should be aware of the implications of the terms that they use quite, perhaps, unwittingly, not knowing the implications are for those of

secretary of state and Myanmar's foreign minister had discussed this "very sensitive and divisive" issue during their meeting. However, Kerry was non-committal to abstain from using the term "Rohingya" and he categorically stated:

I know it arouses strong passions here. At the same time, we all understand, as a matter of fact, that there is a group here in Myanmar that calls itself Rohingya; we understand that and we used that term by ourselves sometimes. [...] What's critical to focus on is solving the problem; what's critical to focus on is improving the situation on the ground to promote development, promote respect for human rights, and to benefit all of those who live in Rakhine and throughout Myanmar.

It is interesting to see the extent to which Washington will continue its Myanmar policy based on right-based value-driven approach. It will be equally interesting to see the extent to which Aung San Suu Kyi will use Washington's policy and agenda to advance her political ambition. Quoting US officials on the condition of anonymity, on 14 May 2016, *Reuters* reported that:

Aung San Suu Kyi supported the extension of U.S. sanctions with some changes [and] discussions with her have focused on how to properly target trade restrictions so they do not hurt Myanmar's overall economy, but keep pressure on military-owned institutions.<sup>10</sup>

As a gesture of support for the NLD government and the state counselor's visit in September 2016, the US government announced it would lift some sanctions and remove significant barriers to doing business in Myanmar. However, it is possible that Suu Kyi might continue to use US

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us who have to cope with the actual problem that arises from this disagreement over what name to use. [...] We are trying to find a solution this problem. While we are trying to find that solution, we would like our friends to be helpful in this to understand that we are not trying to do down any particular group but we are trying to find something some ways forward that will be acceptable to both. That is very difficult. I'm not denying that. If our well-wishers are not ready to cooperate with us, it will make our task that much more difficult, which is not to say that we are going to back away from it. We will still accept it as our responsibility and we will try to do the best we can to resolve the problem to the benefit of both communities."

10 See <<http://in.reuters.com/article/myanmar-usa-exclusive-idINKCN0Y42H9>> and <[www.mmtimes.com/index.php/national-news/yangon/20326-state-counselor-silent-on-sanctions.html](http://www.mmtimes.com/index.php/national-news/yangon/20326-state-counselor-silent-on-sanctions.html)> (6 April 2017).

sanctions as political leverage to seek further political concessions from the Myanmar army.

### 3.6 Relations with ASEAN

With regard to NLD's foreign policy toward the regional institutions, such as ASEAN, it is far from clear. Neither the NLD's nor Aung San Suu Kyi's foreign policy statement mentioned ASEAN. Nearly two decades of strained relations between ASEAN as an institution (as well as its members) and the NLD or Aung San Suu Kyi has raised questions about Suu Kyi's position on the regional association. ASEAN and its member states have rarely communicated with the NLD and its leaders in the past. Diplomats from ASEAN countries in Myanmar stayed away from meetings with the NLD or Suu Kyi. Generally, Suu Kyi was opposed to the "constructive engagement" policy of the association and criticised it for a lack of interest in promoting human rights and democracy in Myanmar. Even after the political liberalisation, during Myanmar's tenure as the chair of ASEAN in 2014, the NLD and Suu Kyi did not participate in ASEAN-related functions.

However, during her press conference together with Thai foreign minister on 9 May 2016, when a journalist asked about her opinion on ASEAN, Suu Kyi referred to her father's idea of a regional organisation. She claimed: "I always take great pride in saying that way back in 1947 my father talked about possibility of such a regional association as ASEAN". She even said that her father had had this kind of idea even before the emergence of the EU and suggested that there should be a regional organisation for cooperation among the nations within the region and that cooperation was meant for fulfilling hopes and for bringing happiness and peace.<sup>11</sup> Since she considers ASEAN as something similar to an organisation that her father imagined way back in late 1940s, besides being pragmatic as the country's foreign minister, it is likely that Suu Kyi will view the association in a positive light. However, it is difficult to know the NLD's view on the role of ASEAN in regional and international affairs. Whether the NLD sees the ASEAN and its related institutions, such as ARF, as institutions to regulate regional great power relations or as instruments of great powers to maintain regional balance of power is not clear. It is difficult to understand the exact extent to which the NLD government will embrace ASEAN's community build-

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11 What her father, Bogyoke Aung San, said in 1947 was the "United States of Indochina" and it was slightly different from rationales behind the formation of ASEAN and what the association is now.



ing agenda, identity creation and norm brewing; but most constructivists are interested in finding this out. In other words, the NLD government's regional vision is not clear in any concrete terms.

During his visit in June 2016, Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong asked Aung San Suu Kyi to "act as a leader of joint ASEAN meetings with other countries, especially during the G20 summit".<sup>12</sup> She agreed and appeared to say that she would do what she can to mediate collaborations between the ASEAN and the international community. During her reciprocal visit to Singapore in December 2016, Suu Kyi was reportedly approached to play the role of an ASEAN leading statesperson. However, before long, Myanmar again became an issue among ASEAN countries when the so-called Rohingya issue started to draw public attention and criticism. The Malaysian government, for domestic political reasons, was critical of the way the Myanmar government handled the issue, and therefore pressed for an informal foreign minister retreat.

On the western border area of Myanmar, there were armed attacks on the security outposts run by the police in October and November 2016. It was later revealed that the attacks were carried out by radicalised transnational network of Rohingya extremists. The situation led to security operations by government forces and there were accusations of gross violations of human rights against Rohingyas. Some foreign media even used the term "genocide" or "ethnic cleansing" to sensationalise the situation. The dramatisation of the issue in international media outlets has further amplified and mounted international pressure on the NLD government. Some ASEAN countries, particularly Malaysia and Indonesia, have taken this issue seriously and pressed the Myanmar government to address it properly. As a result, an informal retreat, chaired by the Laotian foreign minister, was convened in Yangon at the invitation of the Myanmar government.

The ASEAN Foreign Ministers Retreat was finally held on 19 December 2016. At the retreat, Aung San Suu Kyi clarified the situation and informed her ASEAN counterparts about "the Myanmar government's efforts to provide assistance to both the Rohingya Muslim community and ethnic Rakhine Buddhist communities affected by violence in the wake of the attacks". During the open and frank discussions that ensued, the Myanmar government agreed to provide humanitarian access, most importantly the delivery of food, to the Indonesian and Malaysian gov-

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12 See <[www.mmmtimes.com/index.php/national-news/nay-pyi-taw/20728-state-counsellor-asked-to-lead-asean-joint-meetings.html](http://www.mmmtimes.com/index.php/national-news/nay-pyi-taw/20728-state-counsellor-asked-to-lead-asean-joint-meetings.html)> (6 April 2017).

ernments. The verbatim produced at the end of the retreat, by the Malaysian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, reveals the harsh tone carried by the Malaysian foreign minister. While the Myanmar Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement that claimed that the retreat had been called by the Myanmar government, regional newspapers and international media reported it as a Malaysian effort, basically refusing to give credit to the Myanmar government and its foreign minister. However, it was claimed that the Myanmar government was cooperative and frank, probably as a result of its decision to allow the flow of humanitarian aid to the effected community. Nevertheless, this issue, which is an ongoing problem, has more or less undermined and marginalised Aung San Suu Kyi's role in standing up for ASEAN. In fact, at one stage, Malaysia was quite vocal in taking action against the Myanmar government by terminating its membership. On 30 November 2016, the Malaysian Youth and Sports Minister Khairy Jamaluddin Abu Bakar told the annual gathering of the ruling United Malays National Organisation (UMNO): "to ASEAN, we demand that Myanmar's membership in ASEAN be reviewed" and "the principle of non-interference is void when there is large scale ethnic cleansing in an ASEAN member state."<sup>13</sup>

Exactly a month later, Malaysia called an extraordinary meeting of the Organization of Islamist Cooperation (OIC) on the "Rohingya Issue". Just a day before the OIC meeting, Syed Hamid Albar, the OIC Special Envoy to Myanmar, said that the United Nations should intervene in Myanmar to stop further escalation of violence and genocide against Rohingya.<sup>14</sup> In this regard, Myanmar's Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement:

It is regrettable that Malaysia, a fellow ASEAN member, considers it fit to convene an extraordinary session of the Organization of Islamist Cooperation (OIC) to take up Myanmar's Rakhine Issue. [...] It is disturbing to note that the OIC meeting held in KL on 19 January 2017 failed to acknowledge that the situation was a direct result of the well planned and coordinated attack on the police outposts in the northern Rakhine state on 9 October 2016 by extremist elements both funded and inspired from abroad.

In other words, the Rohingya issue has somewhat constrained Myanmar's diplomacy in ASEAN.

13 See <[www.rappler.com/world/regions/asia-pacific/154086-review-myanmar-a-sean-membership-urges-malaysia-minister](http://www.rappler.com/world/regions/asia-pacific/154086-review-myanmar-a-sean-membership-urges-malaysia-minister)> (6 April 2017).

14 See <<http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-myanmar-rohingya-oic-idUKKBN1520C5>> (6 April 2017).

## 4 Conclusions

There are several important features in NLD government's foreign policy. First, the NLD's foreign policy is not new, but it is different. It is obvious that the NLD administration has maintained a pragmatic and delicately balanced relationship among major powers and the NLD's foreign policy is fundamentally a continuation of decades-old "independent, active and non-aligned foreign policy" that Myanmar has been pursuing since the early 1950s. This message has been repeatedly confirmed by the NLD and its leaders. There is no significant change in the foreign policy objectives and principles and the adjustments are mostly in the realm of diplomacy; hence, the difference is in style, not in substance. It is "activism" and "people-centred approach" in diplomacy that make Myanmar's foreign policy different. Naturally, the question is why Myanmar foreign policy under the NLD, which came to power with a powerful slogan of "change", is not new but is different. In this paper I have presented four reasons for this: (1) the USDP government has more or less adjusted the country's foreign policy, (2) the Tatmadaw continues to exercise strong influence over the foreign policy process, (3) the emerging geopolitical environment in the Asia-Pacific region shape the country's foreign policy choice, and finally (4) the NLD's leadership style and political mandate provides little room for public access and input in foreign policy decision making.

In full compliance with the constitutionally proclaimed "independent, active and non-aligned foreign policy", the USDP administration, during its five-year tenure, had skilfully adjusted the country's foreign policy with an aim of "reintegrating Myanmar into international community", which in turn required a diplomatic strategy to maintain delicately balanced relations among major powers around the world, particularly between China and the United States. It was during the USDP period that the Myanmar government managed to display key features of Myanmar foreign policy and their true essence. Even in the practice of multilateralism, with an emphasis on regional institutions and regional cooperation, it was during the USDP government that the country embraced such a foreign policy strategy (see more detail in Maung Aung Myoe 2016). Thus, if the NLD is prepared to preserve the "independent, active and non-aligned foreign policy", as it stated, there is little room for major policy change. Aung San Suu Kyi's pragmatic [re]engagement with China falls squarely within the frame of balanced relations among major powers.

In reality, the 2008 constitution was designed to find a ruling partner for the Tatmadaw in politics. Although the Tatmadaw does not have any formal role in foreign policy decision-making, it still exercises con-

siderable influence over foreign policy process though its defence diplomacy and arms procurement; it could either strengthen or undermine the NLD government's foreign policy goals and strategies. Official visits and meetings between senior Tatmadaw commanders and their counterparts from neighbouring countries indicate that the Tatmadaw is deeply involved in managing Myanmar's relations with neighbouring countries. In terms of arms procurement policy, for instance, the failure to lift the arms embargo imposed by the West or the United States has allowed the Tatmadaw to maintain some form of leverage over the NLD's foreign policy. With these embargoes in place, the Tatmadaw is likely to rely on Russia and/or China for arms supply (*Xinhua News* 2016). The NLD government has to deal with the (indirect) pressure and influences coming from the Tatmadaw, which is essentially the political establishment in Myanmar. At present, although it generally supports the NLD government's foreign policy position, the Tatmadaw, for its own strategic outlook and practical necessity, has maintained a policy of maintaining stable relations with China and Russia, at the same time as having more and more engagement with the United Kingdom and the United States. In addition, the Tatmadaw has effectively managed Myanmar's relations with neighbouring countries since there are several bilateral border issues that necessitated coordination between militaries from both sides.

The emerging pattern of great power politics in the Asia-Pacific is also an important factor. Despite its stated policy of "rebalancing" or "pivot to Asia" in American grand strategy during the Obama administration, the US commitment in Asia-Pacific region is uncertain and questionable. This situation will be heightened under the Trump administration, which has already displayed "isolationist tendency" in US foreign policy. Moreover, China has become increasingly assertive in the region, particularly in the West Pacific Ocean, and become active in establishing its influence in Southeast Asia, particularly on the mainland. Under these circumstances, there are indications that some regional countries, such as Thailand, the Philippines, and Vietnam, have increasingly engaged with China, discreetly bandwagoning with the rising power, perhaps for both security challenges and economic opportunities. Especially in the case of Myanmar, since China holds the keys to the peace process and has leverage over several ethnic armed organisations, it has set the parameters for the Myanmar government to manoeuvre its foreign relations.

The NLD's leadership style and political mandate provides little room for public access and input in foreign policy decision making. The landslide electoral victory has provided an unprecedented political man-

date for the NLD to rule the country. In this regard, in the context of democratisation in Myanmar, Larry Diamond issuing the following warning in his foreword to the first issue of *Myanmar Quarterly*:

The challenge is particularly urgent when founding democratic elections produce a landslide victory for one party. In other countries, this outcome has often been associated with a slide toward renewed authoritarianism, for two reasons. First, in winning a landslide, the victorious party and its leader are tempted to think of themselves as the embodiment of the national will, with transcendent moral authority that does not need to answer to political opposition or civil society. And second, as a practical matter, when one party dominates the political landscape, the political opposition lacks the numbers in parliament and the organization and standing in society to provide an effective check. (Diamond 2016)

Moreover, from a domestic structural perspective, the 2008 constitution does not provide any meaningful parliamentary oversight over the issues of foreign policy and it is the executive that has authority to manage foreign relations. There is also little “access point” through which societal forces could influence the direction of foreign policy.

In terms of leadership style, just weeks before the NLD took office, Nicholas Farrelly remarked:

The irony is that even at the best of times the NLD is far from a model of transparency or democratic management. The authoritarian instinct starts at the top, with Aung San Suu Kyi's iron grip on decision-making. [...] What has not changed is her requirement for intense personal loyalty and her need to remain the final authority. The NLD is her vehicle and, as its revolutionary leader, she makes no apologies for taking charge. (Farrelly 2016)

This assessment remains essentially relevant and approving. To a large extent, Aung San Suu Kyi has remained the embodiment of national will.

Recently, former US Ambassador to Myanmar Derek Mitchell, who was instrumental in engaging Myanmar, pointed out that the NLD administration lacks “respect for civil society and media” (Mitchell 2017). What we are witnessing now in Myanmar, within the first year of NLD administration, is that the NLD and its leadership have increasingly marginalised the role of mediating institutions in governance. At the same time, the NLD leadership could effectively insulate itself from public pressure on foreign policy (decision making). In the context of Myanmar's foreign policy, it means that the NLD administration could neu-

tralise anti-China sentiment prevalent among Myanmar general public and pursue a pragmatic policy of balanced relations among major powers.

Second, the NLD's foreign policy statements reflect a neoliberal worldview with a greater reliance on "international institutions". The fact that the foreign policy and diplomacy under the NLD government is people-centred means – if I may borrow lexicon from security studies – that the referent object in the emerging Myanmar's foreign policy is not simply the "state" for its survival, but the "society" for its wellbeing. While the survival and security of the state is obviously at its core, a central objective of Myanmar foreign policy is no longer a narrow interest of regime survival but for the best interest of both state and society in Myanmar. If this assumption is correct, it suggests a considerable shift in worldview, from one of realism to a neoliberalism in perspective.<sup>15</sup> What is not clear is whether the NLD government will place greater reliance on collective security and cooperative security institutions for the state security. Third, more attention will be given to multilateralism than to bilateralism in the NLD's conduct of diplomacy. It is expected that the NLD government will actively participate in multilateral institutions; again, this is something that the NLD's predecessor has already engaged in this venture.

Fourth, an expansion of diplomacy is expected. Based on various statements issued by the NLD and Aung San Suu Kyi, Myanmar's foreign relations will be conducted by multiple tracks of diplomacy, with more emphasis on people-to-people contacts. In this sense, Myanmar's diplomacy will be conducted through government-to-government, mili-

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15 Realists tend to pay more attention to state security and survival and focuses on what is known as power politics, while neoliberals look closer at international cooperation and are interested in issues related to political economy, global environment, and human rights. Therefore, realists take a state-centric view of foreign policy to address the distribution of power in international system while neoliberal institutionalists favour international institutions and regimes to manage complex interdependence and various issues pertaining to the process of globalisation. For realists, international institutions and regimes are instruments of statecraft and they serve the interests of the state. States continue to support them if the cooperation fostered by these institutions and regimes do not unfairly advantage other states; in other words, realists are more interested in relative gain than absolute gain. For neoliberals, institutions and regimes, once established, assume life of their own and they influence the foreign policy of the states; they promote and facilitate foreign policy agenda in both policy-making and policy-implementation by providing lower transaction cost or critical information and expertise. For them, absolute gain is more important than relative gain. Moreover, neoliberals are interested not only in state-to-state relations but also in multiple channels of relations among different communities.

tary-to-military, academia-to-academia, business-to-business, citizen-to-citizen, media-to-media, party-to-party, parliament-to-parliament, and civil society-to-civil society relations. People-centred diplomacy is not free of problems. Various studies have revealed that there is a gap in term of perception between citizen and foreign policy elite. However, with a strong mandate and political legitimacy, the NLD government, particularly in the name of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, will be able to manage public expectations.

Fifth, the NLD government is likely to maintain balanced relations with all major powers, especially among US, China, India and Russia. It is unlikely that the NLD government will align its foreign policy with the West in general and the United States in particular. In addition, contrary to rhetorical statements made by the NLD leadership in the past, by hijacking people's emotions with regard to China's behaviour in Myanmar, the NLD government will be pragmatic in its relations with China. Similarly, the NLD government has cultivated cordial relations with both Russia and the United States. While Washington is likely to remain at the centre of NLD's foreign policy focus, Myanmar's relations with the US will not necessarily be at the disadvantage of other major powers. Moreover, the necessity of balanced relations among major powers is further reinforced by a recent development where the United Kingdom and the United States proposed tabling Myanmar's human rights issue at the UN Security Council, while China and Russia refused to do so.

Sixth, there are opportunities for Myanmar's foreign policy to be substantially independent, active and non-aligned. Since Aung San Suu Kyi enjoys widespread public support and political legitimacy, the NLD government will have a strong amount of latitude for diplomatic manoeuvring. With her international credentials, Suu Kyi could be a chief diplomat from the Southeast Asia region in terms of promoting not only Myanmar's profile but also those of ASEAN and its related institutions. Having said that, whether Suu Kyi will be able to play such a role remains to be seen under present circumstances. Meanwhile, the so-called Rohingya issue has complicated Myanmar's foreign relations and undermined Suu Kyi's international standing and reputation. Even some Nobel laureates and human rights activities criticised her for a so-called lack of protection or practice of "ethnic cleansing" against Rohingya. By early 2017, when the United Nations released a report on the Rohingya issue, the amount of Western pressure on the NLD government and the state counsellor increased. Her international reputation as a champion of human rights has become seriously challenged and her credentials as an icon of democracy have been substantially undermined. Consequently, if



her international charisma and political support, drawn largely from the West, eventually runs out, she may find that her diplomatic manoeuvrability has dramatically declined and Myanmar's foreign relations will face more serious challenges.

At the same time, the NLD needs to manage public expectation from both the domestic audience and the international community. Due to her huge popularity and great influence, Aung San Suu Kyi could be able to persuade her compatriots to leave foreign affairs in her hands. For the international community, it will be much more challenging as expectations are based largely on her credentials as a champion of human rights and universal liberal values. As mentioned earlier, just a day after the inauguration of the NLD-led government in Myanmar, *TIME* magazine published an article entitled "5 Challenges Facing Burma's New Civilian Government" (Lewis 2016). One of the challenges identified was "an unwanted people" known as Rohingya; about 1 million people living mostly in two western-most corners in Rakhine state. The previous USDP government and the Myanmar military held a firm position that the Rohingya are illegal Bengali migrants and are not entitled to hold Myanmar citizenship. This issue will be a difficult one as must balance the domestic popular sentiment of anti-Bengali migrants and the high expectation of foreign activists and rights advocates to protect "the minority". Challenges also include civil-military relations. Since the Tatmadaw has exercised great influence on, if not control over, Myanmar's foreign relations, particularly with neighbouring countries, it is necessary for the NLD government to establish smooth relations with the military. The lack of a good relationship and understanding between the NLD and its leaders on the one hand, and the Tatmadaw and its senior commanders on the other, could undermine the overall direction of Myanmar's foreign policy.

In sum, despite all these challenges, it is expected that activism in Myanmar foreign policy will be once again back on centre stage, with more dynamic diplomacy conducted through multiple tracks under the NLD government. Aung San Suu Kyi's fame and global influence is perhaps the most important asset and driving force behind Myanmar's return to the world of international diplomacy. Myanmar's foreign policy under the NLD government, while retaining the survival and security of the state at its core, will not aim for the narrow interest of regime survival, but instead for the best interests of both state and society in Myanmar. Therefore, Myanmar's foreign policy under the NLD administration led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is not new, but it is different.



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